

Message Text

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PAGE 01 KINGST 00710 01 OF 02 141505Z
ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 DHA-02
SCA-01 OMB-01 /060 W
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FM AMEMBASSY KINGSTON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4069
INFO AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN
AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN
AMEMBASSY NASSAU
AMEMBASSY PORT

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 KINGSTON 0710

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PINS, JM
SUBJECT: REMA INCIDENT EMBARRASSES MANLEY GOVERNMENT

REFERENCE: KINGSTON 564

1. SUMMARY. THE WEST KINGSTON/REMA EVICTION INCIDENT (REFTEL)
IS NOW CAUSING CONSIDERABLE EMBARRASSMENT TO THE MANLEY GOVERN-
MENT. EVEN LIFE-LONG RADICAL SUPPORTERS OF THE PNP ARE
ATTACKING THE GOVERNMENT'S INVOLVEMENT AND SUBSEQUENT HANDLING
OF IT. SOME KEY SUPPORTERS ARE ON THE EDGE OF PUBLICLY
BREAKING WITH MANLEY. THE INCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH ARE
DESCRIBED IN SOME DETAIL SINCE THE AFFAIR MAY BECOME THE
MOST SIGNIFICANT CREDIBILITY CRISIS YET FACED BY MANLEY.
END SUMMARY.

2. IT NOW SEEMS CLEAR THAT THE REMA INCIDENT -- WHICH
INVOLVED THE FORCIBLE EVICTION OF NUMEROUS FAMILIES --
WAS THE RESULT OF A DECISION BY HOUSING MINISTER TONY
SPAULDING WITHOUT REFERENCE TO OTHER MINISTRIES OR THE
CABINET. THE INCIDENT BEGAN WHEN A NUMBER OF MEN IN
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PAGE 02 KINGST 00710 01 OF 02 141505Z

PLAIN CLOTHES ENTERED REMA (A JLP STRONGHOLD) IN POLICE
VEHICLES AND BEGAN A RAMPAGE WHICH LED TO LARGE-SCALE
DISPOSSESSION OF FAMILIES (UP TO 1000 INDIVIDUALS),
WANTON DESTRUCTION (OR THEFT) OF PROPERTY, AND THE DEATH
OF ONE PERSON. HOUSING MINISTRY PERSONNEL WERE LATER
PRESENT TO ENFORCE THE EVICTIONS, BUT ONLY AFTER THOSE
AFFECTED HAD BEEN DRIVEN FROM THEIR APARTMENTS AND

MOST OF THE DAMAGE HAD BEEN DONE.

3. THE HOUSING MINISTRY HAS SOUGHT TO ARGUE THAT MOST OF THOSE EVICTED WERE SQUATTERS. IT HAS ACKNOWLEDGED, HOWEVER, THAT OTHERS WERE ONLY IN ARREARS IN PAYMENT OF RENT. BY ALL ACCOUNTS SQUATTERS WERE FEW IN NUMBER, AND MOST OF THOSE AFFECTED WERE PERSONS OWING RENT, AND OTHERS WHO SIMPLY HAD THE MISFORTUNE TO BE IN THE SAME BUILDINGS. A VARIETY OF COMMENTATORS HAVE POINTED OUT THAT THE MINISTRY HAD NOT YET EXHAUSTED ITS LEGAL REMEDIES VIS-A-VIS THOSE OWING RENT. OTHERS POINT OUT THAT THE REMA INHABITANTS WERE CAUGHT IN A CATCH-22 SITUATION IN THAT IT WAS ACTUALLY DANGEROUS FOR THEM TO TRY TO PAY THEIR RENT. REMA IS A STRONG-HOLD OF THE OPPOSITION JAMAICA LABOUR PARTY (JLP). IN THE PAST, THE HOUSING MINISTRY MAINTAINED AN OFFICE IN THE AREA WHICH RECEIVED RENTAL PAYMENTS. HOWEVER, THIS OFFICE WAS CLOSED, FORCING THE REMA TENANTS TO GO TO NEIGHBORING ARNETT GARDENS TO FIND THE NEAREST HOUSING MINISTRY OFFICE. ARNETT GARDENS -- "CONCRETE JUNGLE" -- IS A BASTION OF THE RULING PEOPLES' NATIONAL PARTY (PNP) OR, PERHAPS MORE CORRECTLY, OF HOUSING MINISTER SPAULDING. REMA RESIDENTS QUITE LITERALLY CONSIDER "CONCRETE JUNGLE" AS ENEMY TERRITORY; ENTERING THAT AREA CAN BE TANTAMOUNT TO SUICIDE.

4. THE MOTIVE UNDERLYING THE HOUSING MINISTRY'S MANNER OF HANDLING THE EVICTIONS IS NOT WHOLLY CLEAR. CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 KINGST 00710 01 OF 02 141505Z

HOWEVER, THERE IS REASON TO CONCLUDE THAT IT LIES IN THE INTERNAL POLITICS OF THE PNP. IN THE DECEMBER 1976 ELECTION, HOUSING MINISTER SPAULDING WON BY THE LARGEST PERCENTAGE OF VOTES ACCORDED ANY CANDIDATE. THERE IS A REPORT THAT, EMBOLDENED BY HIS SUCCESS, HE DEMANDED OF PRIME MINISTER MANLEY THAT HE BE APPOINTED DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER (A POSITION HELD BY FINANCE MINISTER COORE). SPAULDING WAS REBUFFED, TO HIS INTENSE DISPLEASURE. WITH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS NOW PLANNED FOR MARCH, SPAULDING MAY BE ATTEMPTING TO EXTEND HIS FIEFDOM; HE THUS USED NON-PAYMENT OF RENT BY REMA RESIDENTS AS AN EXCUSE TO REPLACE JLP SUPPORTERS IN THAT AREA WITH HIS OWN SUPPORTERS. IN SHORT, HE SEEKS TO BROADEN FURTHER HIS POWER BASE IN CONNECTION WITH HIS PERSONAL AMBITIONS WITHIN THE PNP GOVERNMENT.

5. THE GOVERNMENT'S SUBSEQUENT HANDLING OF THE REMA INCIDENT HAS BEEN INEPT. THE PRIME MINISTER INITIALLY CALLED FOR APROMPT REPORT ON THE INCIDENT FROM THE

HOUSING AND NATIONAL SECURITY MINISTRIES. WHILE THE OSTENSIBLE REASON MAY HAVE BEEN TO DEMONSTRATE HIS AND HIS GOVERNMENT'S CONCERN OVER THE REMA INCIDENT, IT WAS ALSO INTERPRETED IN SOME CIRCLES AS A SWIFT MOVE BY THE PRIME MINISTER TO PLACE RESPONSIBILITY ON THE SHOULDERS OF HOUSING MINISTER SPAULDING -- AND TO ABSOLVE THE REMAINDER OF THE GOVERNMENT FROM ANY ACCOUNTABILITY. HOWEVER, WHILE SPAULDING WAS LEFT TO EXPLAIN THE INCIDENT AWAY -- FITFULLY ASSISTED BY THE JUSTICE MINISTER, SENATOR CARL RATTRAY -- AND SOUGHT TO ASSERT THE JUSTIFIABILITY OF SUMMARILY OUSTING TRESPASSERS, THE GOVERNMENT, AND MOST PARTICULARLY THE PRIME MINISTER, REMAINED SILENT.

CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 01 KINGST 00710 02 OF 02 141517Z
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 KINGSTON 0710

6. GIVEN THE GOVERNMENT'S INADEQUATE RESPONSE TO WIDESPREAD EXPRESSIONS OF CONCERN, THE JLP, A NUMBER OF COLUMNISTS, AND EVEN RADICAL SUPPORTERS OF THE PNP, CONTINUE TO ASK POINTED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INCIDENT AND ITS AFTERMATH. PROMINENT JOURNALIST JOHN HEARNE, LONG A SUPPORTER OF THE PRIME MINISTER, ATTACKED THE GOVERNMENT AT LENGTH IN A GLEANER ARTICLE. HE STRESSED THE UNPROVOKED AND UNWARRANTED WAY IN WHICH REMA DWELLERS WERE ASSAULTED, NOTING THAT ONLY THE JAMAICA DEFENSE FORCE AND SOME POLICE HAD SHOWN ANY KIND OF DISCIPLINE AND CONTROL WHEN THEY MOVED TO HALT THE SHOOTING AND LOOTING IN REMA. HE PUBLICLY THREATENED TO BREAK WITH MANLEY AND THE GOVERNMENT UNLESS THE

SITUATION WAS REMEDIED. WHILE HEARNE'S REMARKS DEALT WITH THE GOVERNMENT AS AN ENTITY, PROMINENT PNP RADICAL, RONNIE THWAITES, WRITING IN THE DAILY NEWS (WHICH IS GENERALLY SUPPORTIVE OF THE GOVERNMENT) TOOK AIM AT SPAULDING, DESCRIBING THE ACTION IN REMA AS "FASCIST," NOT SOCIALIST" IN CHARACTER; THWAITES' READERS DOUBTLESS WERE SUPPOSED TO CONCLUDE THAT SPAULDING IS THE FASCIST. THE CHOIR HAS SINCE BEEN JOINED BY THE
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CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 KINGST 00710 02 OF 02 141517Z

JAMAICAN COUNCIL ON HUMAN RIGHTS (A GROUP WHICH NORMALLY HAS PUSHED LEFTIST CAUSES, AND WHICH WAS DEEPLY INVOLVED IN PHILIP AGEE'S VISIT LAST SEPTEMBER), AND VARIOUS OTHER RADICALS.

7. THE UNRELIEVED PRESSURE ON THE GOVERNMENT HAS LED IT TO PROPOSE THE APPOINTMENT OF A SPECIAL JOINT COMMITTEE OF PARLIAMENT TO CONDUCT AN INQUIRY INTO THE REMA INCIDENT. IT CLEARLY IS EMBARRASSED BY THE ADVERSE REACTION OF MANY OF ITS USUAL SUPPORTERS, AND APPARENTLY HAS CONCLUDED THAT ITS POPULAR FOLLOWING MAY BE HURT UNLESS EARLY ACTION IS TAKEN. THE JLP HAS RESPONDED NEGATIVELY TO THE PROPOSED INQUIRY. THE OPPOSITION PARTY FEARS THAT THE COMMITTEE -- WITH A MAJORITY OF PNP MEMBERS -- WILL SIMPLY WHITEWASH THE GOVERNMENT. IT THEREFORE SEEKS A JUDICIAL INQUIRY -- AND FINDS GROWING PUBLIC AND MEDIA SUPPORT FOR THIS DEMAND. IF THE DEMAND IS DENIED, THE JLP IS DOUBTLESS CONTENT TO LET THE GOVERNMENT REMAIN EMBARRASSED, PARTICULARLY SINCE IT (THE JLP) ALSO BELIEVES THE PNP'S ELECTORAL SHENANIGANS WILL SOON BECOME PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE AS A RESULT OF ELECTION PETITIONS FILED BY ITS UNSUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES. THE ABOVE COMBINATION, PLUS THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CRISIS, WILL, (ACCORDING TO OUR JLP SOURCES), SHARPLY ERODE POPULAR CONFIDENCE IN AND SUPPORT OF THE MANLEY GOVERNMENT.

8. IT IS NOW CLEAR THE REMA INCIDENT, WHICH ORIGINALLY SEEMED A TYPICAL -- IF UNUSUALLY VICIOUS -- EXAMPLE OF JAMAICAN POLITICAL THUGGERY, HAS BECOME A MAJOR EMBARRASSMENT AND CREDIBILITY CRISIS FOR PM MANLEY. HOW PERMENTNT THE DAMAGE WILL BE REMAINS TO BE SEEN AND WILL BE DETERMINED IN LARGE PART BY MANELY'S FUTURE HANDLING OF THE AFFAIR. IN THIS REGARD HE FACES A MAJOR DILEMMA. VIRTUALLY THE ENTIRE POLITICAL SPECTRUM OF JAMAICA, INCLUDING A WIDE RANGE OF MODERATE AND RADICAL
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PAGE 03 KINGST 00710 02 OF 02 141517Z

SUPPORTERS OF MANLEY, AND MOST OF THE MEDIA, HAVE OPENLY ATTACKED THE EVICTION ITSELF AND THE GOVERNMENT'S SUBSEQUENT HANDLING OF THE AFFAIR. ALL OF THESE INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND MEDIA, CLEARLY EXPECT SOMETHING MORE THAN A WHITEWASH. MANY SEEK THE REMOVAL OF MINISTER SPAULDING. ON THE OTHER HAND SPAULDING'S POWER BASE IS INDEED A FORMIDABLE ONE AND INCLUDES AN ARMY OF THUGS WHICH EVEN THE COMBINED SECURITY FORCES WOULD HESITATE TO TAKE ON. ONE WOULD THINK THAT AT A MINIMUM MANLEY WOULD BE COMPELLED TO REPRIMAND SPAULDING PUBLICLY, AND STRIP HIM OF SOME OF HIS AUTHORITY. THIS WOULD NOT ONLY RESTORE SOME CONFIDENCE IN THIS GOVERNMENT BUT ALSO WOULD REDUCE TO SOME DEGREE THE POLITICAL THREAT THAT SPAULDING HAS ALWAYS REPRESENTED VIS-A-VIS MANLEY'S OWN POSITION. HOWEVER, LOGIC DOES NOT ALWAYS PREVAIL AND MANLEY HAS BYPASSED PREVIOUS OPPORTUNITIES TO CUT SPAULDING DOWN TO SIZE. THE ONE THING THAT REMAINS CERTAIN IS THAT THE CRISIS IS BY NO MEANS OVER AND PROBABLY WILL INTENSIFY IN THE COMING DAYS AND WEEKS. GERARD

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